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Telling ELT Tales out of School

E-documentaries in content-based instruction (CBI) in an academic EFL setting

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate how educational videos and documentaries are incorporated into the content-based instruction (CBI) in an EFL academic context. After a brief description of the implementation of online library of such videos, the results of an online survey will be shared and the implications will be discussed.

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Keywords: Content-based instruction (CBI); EFL; academic context

1. Introduction

The introduction of communicative approach followed by content-based instruction (CBI) has shifted the focus and purpose of language teaching in many academic contexts from discrete grammar items to fostering communicative ability. In CBI, language teachers try to present content while trying to increase the language proficiency level because using target content in language classrooms is believed to prepare students better for their academic studies. Students also try to cope with both language and content issues at receptive and productive level such as understanding lectures and texts and incorporating them into written or spoken tasks. Teaching and learning a foreign language with the help of content can be a challenging task for both students and teachers.

One of the ways of easing students' load and aiding both instructors and learners in CBI courses is the use of videos. Content videos—ranging from short and long television programmes, documentaries to movies and tailor-made educational videos—in schools have enhanced the quality of language instruction and thus have become an invaluable teaching tool (Furmanovsky, 1996, Erkaya, 2008, Wood, 1999). Several books including Brinton et al. (1989), Lonergan (1992), Stempleski (1992) have also published useful guidelines for using videos in content-based language courses. Content videos are regarded as beneficial as they offer several opportunities to CBI teachers in

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EFL/ESL, who aim to promote critical thinking skills, supplement the course material and revise target words or phrases. In addition, they can open up a world of knowledge and are engaging as well as motivating for learners.

1.1. The Context

In our pre-faculty intensive English programme in School of Languages, we aim to prepare students for the faculty courses which are conducted all in English. There are three main levels; basic, intermediate and upper-intermediate. The students are expected to read, write, listen and speak about a number of topics covered in each unit. To be able to achieve this, they need more input on the same topics. To meet the need for extra sources, content videos have been used to supplement the course content since 2003. With the growing number of content videos available, we felt the need to form an electronic library of e-documentaries by recording documentaries from various TV channels or using the DVDs available in our school library.

1.2. The Purpose

The aims for the project of forming an electronic library of e-documentaries (were threefold. Firstly, it was essential to prepare an inventory of the materials that were available or lost in our library. In time, some of the videos used were either lost or distorted for some reason. Therefore, by utilizing the technological facilities at the library, videos were uploaded on e-reserve on the library's website, allowing viewers to watch them in their own time within the boundaries of the campus. This way, the videos were protected against damage or loss.

Secondly, as mentioned before, content videos offer great learning and teaching opportunities to both the teacher and the instructor in terms of language development and motivation. They serve as useful self-access materials to be used inside and outside the class, which can improve self-learning skills. In a CBI context, the use of such educational videos can support the course content thus facilitate learning by having students revise the content and the language practiced in the lessons. The inclusion of such visual aids increases student motivation in that they may cater for students with different learning styles—especially, audio/visual learners. In addition to their contribution to student motivation, videos are also pleasurable to watch since they add variety as supplementary materials and make the lessons more interesting by breaking the routine. In addition, in content-based EAP contexts, students can improve their knowledge as well as their language proficiency when they view these videos. With the help of pre or post activities such as discussions, teachers can also encourage students to develop their critical thinking skills.

Finally, another aim of the task group was to collect the task sheets that the teachers produced for these videos. To this end, our colleagues were encouraged to share the materials that they created or revised the existing ones that were circulated. Thus, the teachers have been able to save time for their lesson preparation by helping them collate these task sheets and upload on SOnline (a shared folder in the intranet) in the relevant unit folder. In general, this work has contributed to collaboration among the teachers to share the materials.

2. Effectiveness of Content Videos

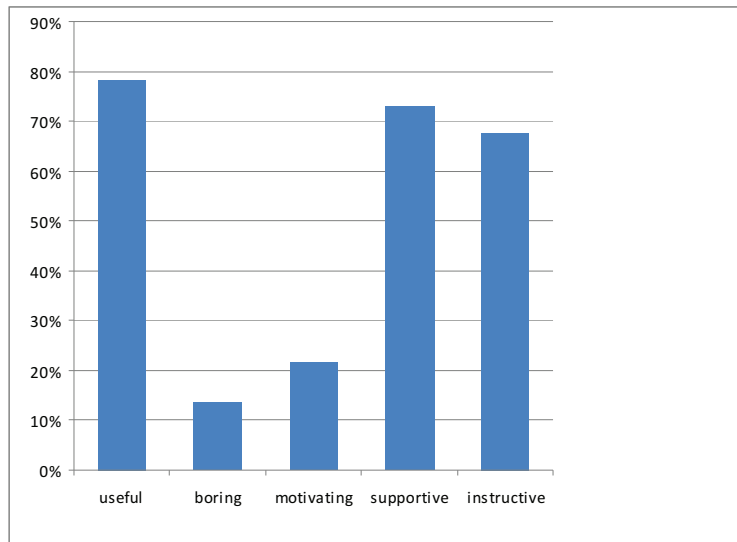
Even though video-based lessons seem to achieve their aim in the context of Sabancı University, there are some considerations. First of all, there is not enough experimental data on the benefits of using them in this context. There is a tendency to believe that students enjoy variety and visual support to improve their knowledge and skills; however, the extent to which they achieve their aim is unclear. The aim of this research was to identify if the use of e-documentaries in class and outside school fostered learning the language and content.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of content videos, both the teachers and the students were asked to fill in an online survey. 41 students from both Intermediate and Upper Intermediate levels and 21 instructors have participated in the survey.

The responses from both teachers and students indicated that in general the use of content videos is considered beneficial in learning and remembering the content of the units covered in class. The survey results showed that for 75% of the students, watching videos is one of the most favourite spare time activities outside classroom. By integrating what they enjoy doing into the course, we believe this visual resource has contributed a great deal to their motivation and learning in general. In general, the findings support this view. For example, 80.6% of the students find viewing documentaries and such educational videos beneficial and 75% percent think it supports course content

and language. 66% think it is educating and informative. Similarly, 50% of the teachers indicated that such resources are quite useful to improve language competence and academic skills.

Table 1. Student Attitudes



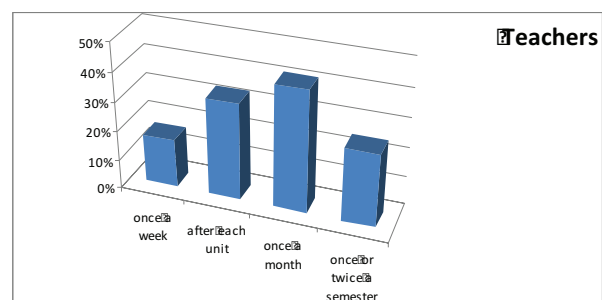
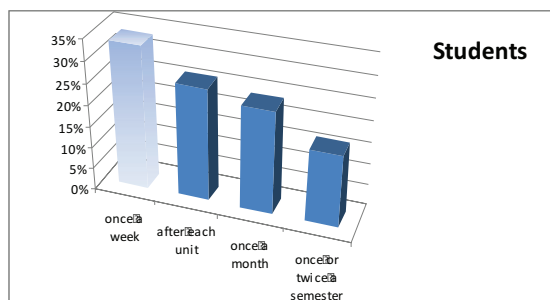
2.1. Survey Results

Some of the highlights of the survey results are as follows:

Proficiency level in which the videos are used: In general the use of documentaries in and out of class is highly beneficial for supplementing course material as well as improving language, especially in the higher levels of language proficiency (intermediate and upper intermediate level) when students are reader for authentic language.

Frequency of use/viewing: While the results of the student survey showed that 34% of the students watch a video every week, responses from teachers indicated that 41% percent use them once a month in their classes.

Table 2. Frequency of use

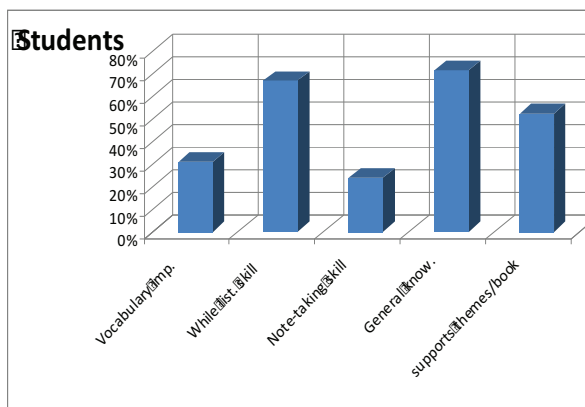
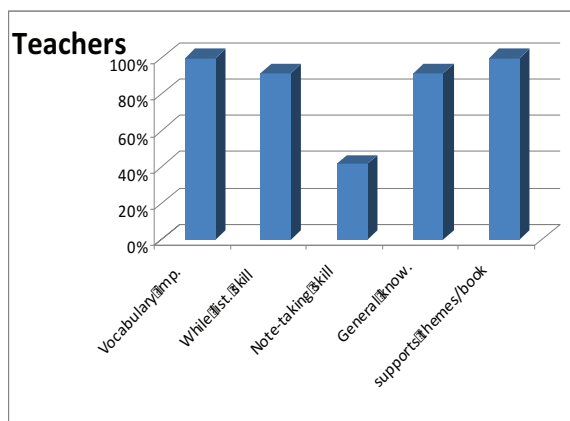


Purpose of content videos: 25 out of 41 students commented about the importance of its role in understanding a topic and supplementing course content. In addition to improving content knowledge, students also commented that watching videos can reinforce the language items covered in class and recycle topic-related words. Teachers also

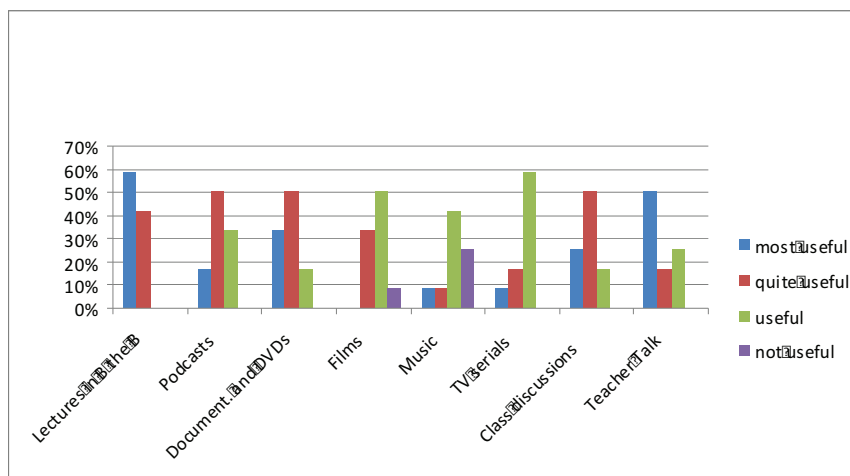
indicated that the use of documentaries reinforces content covered in class and provides additional information from different perspectives. In general, it is interesting to note that videos are considered an invaluable source of motivation rather than a means of improving grammar and vocabulary.

Benefit of content videos: In answer to this question, both teacher and student informants stated that videos benefit them in improving their general knowledge. All teachers, however, highlighted the importance of videos in vocabulary development, whereas only 36 percent of the student informants thought that they improved their lexical knowledge. The results of the survey given to the students indicated that some teachers commented that when the programme is less tight, such visual materials can be incorporated more often.

Table 3. Benefits of content videos



Content videos vs. other listening materials (comparison of materials): According to the teachers' responses, watching videos has been ranked the third with 50% as 'quite useful' after the lectures in their course book, with 58.3% and teacher talk with 54.5%. This implies that content videos used to supplement the course materials have achieved their aim of improving listening skill to a considerable extent.

Table 4. Usefulness of content videos compared to other listening input

Suggestions to improve the use of videos: In response to the question about how to improve the current system, many teachers requested more content videos with task sheets which focus on language and vocabulary and productive skills. They also recommended integrating them to weekly planning list and encouraging students to use them in their own time. Other suggestions include some technical improvement of this facility such as providing strong internet connection and access outside campus and practical issues such indicating subtitles, difficulty level and duration of the material.

3. Conclusion

The main advantages of having e-documentaries on library website are as follows:

- It gives an opportunity to do the same lesson in different classes at the same time.
- It prevents over copying of relevant DVDs to use at a time.
- The materials do not get lost.
- All teachers know what is available for each level they teach.
- It prevents waste of time to find a DVD on the shelves.
- It gives an opportunity to the students to do the listening they miss or to do extra listening in their own time.
- It encourages exploitation and improvement of current materials.

The survey indicates that content videos must be an integral part of instruction as they increase motivation as well as language skills. However, the content of videos should be selected carefully. Some students commented that they wanted to see shorter authentic videos to maintain their attention. Another suggestion is that the task sheets prepared for the videos should have fewer questions as it is challenging to watch and answer questions at the same time and the task should be varied including vocabulary exercises and discussions.

3.1. Suggestions

If the system of e-documentaries is to be implemented in other contexts, the following steps can be followed. Initially, lists of content videos that match the topic of each unit can be prepared for various levels. Some websites such as CNN or BBC can be checked for a start (see Appendix I for suggested links). Task sheets that accompany the video can be prepared individually or collaboratively with other teachers. Then they can be made accessible to other instructors either in soft copy (i.e., in a common electronic folder) or in hard copy. This may enable and encourage the users to see the relevant videos and the possible task sheets that go with them.

Secondly, the school library or IT department can be contacted to see if it is possible to upload these materials in library website or on an online system. This technology, however, can only be made available on campus to avoid copyright issues. Before choosing and preparing video based lessons, it may be useful to consider the issues covered in the checklist in Appendix II.

3.2. Limitations

This was a qualitative study; therefore, it is difficult to generalise the findings due to the limited number of the participants. It is also important to note that a good internet connection and provision of technical support are essential for institutions which consider implementing an efficient working video library. As mentioned before, another concern is copyright laws for the videos taken from news programmes and TV channels or DVDs. The solution for this could be to provide a limited access to the users (i.e., only on campus). Finally, in addition to the technical aspect, the school should have a sharing atmosphere where colleagues are willing to support and encourage each other in order to realize a similar project.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix I. Suggested websites for content videos

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/>

<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/videos/>

<http://video.msn.com/?mkt=en-us&brand=msnbc>

<http://www.history.com/video.do?action=home>

Appendix II. Checklist for teachers who want to incorporate content videos into their lessons.

1. To what extent does this content video support the syllabus/topic?
2. How appropriate is the language for a target group of learners?
3. How will the students at a particular level benefit from this content video?
4. How long is it? Which segment is appropriate for different tasks?
5. What is the purpose of using it? How can it be exploited to reinforce both the target language and academic skills?
6. Considering the visual and the auditory components, how manageable is the task?
7. How many times do they need to watch it to be able to do the tasks?
8. How will you prepare the students so that they can easily understand it? Is it necessary to have pre- and post viewing activities?
9. How will you assess comprehension?